

# Robust Retirement

## Looking after yourself and each other during the early stages of retirement

**John Frew**

I'm sure we all looked forward to being released from the day-to-day demands of our busy schedules. Dreams of happy times, not having our lives controlled by the Department, our schools, demanding parents and those pesky kids. We now had the freedom and time to pursue our pleasures, travel, spend time on our hobbies, just the ability to ignore the clock. But if you're like me, this transition from work to retirement was difficult.

The day before I retired probably over 1,000 persons were affected by my presence. I was the 'captain' of an extended team which provided me with happiness, including social connections, status, a steady routine and a sense of purpose. Sure, at first I enjoyed my 'freedom', but I soon missed those exchanges.

I recently came across an article about those menacing companions – defeat and entrapment – which motivated me to put pen to paper and share the following information. It has been demonstrated that there is a significant link between being caught in such a trap when our defining purpose and the power of our position has been removed, the road is closed and the power gone out. The result is a high correlation between this event and the development of mental illness – things like depression, anxiety problems, PTSD and suicidality. According to a study by the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs, the likelihood that someone will suffer from clinical depression actually goes up by about 40% after retirement.

The abrupt cessation of work forces us into the situation I have described above. We feel trapped and without a clear transition to an activity that replaces those features, are left feeling defeated. There are three general problems:

1. The failure to attain valued social and material resources.
2. Loss of social prominences.
3. Internal denigration of our self – things like self-criticism, unfavourable comparisons with others or 'ambitions' we can't achieve.

### **So what to do?**

This transition is a very liberating time for those who have strong self-belief and have little need to replace the qualities our work provided. For others it may be access to another career – we all know lots of retired principals who continue to work in schools or the Department or elsewhere, and some whose hobbies such as music or art provide the much-needed support. However, for a significant number of us this transition presents challenges for our mental health and it is doubly hard to ask for help when for years you have been the one providing help to others. You just have to look at the numbers of practicing principals experiencing real mental illness as identified by the principals' surveys. We are a vulnerable group!

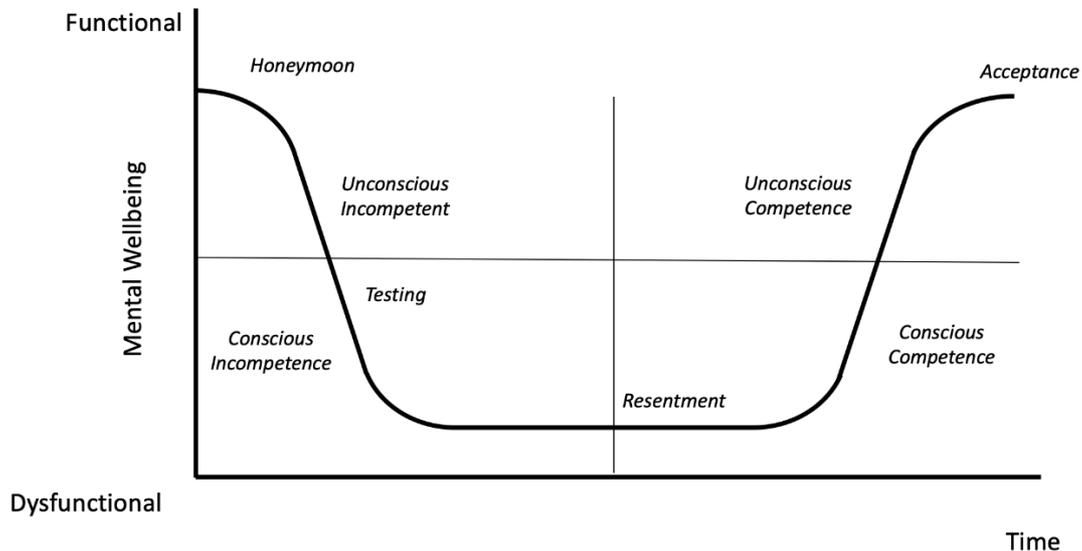
It is important to seek out professional help if you do experience significant psychological disturbance in early retirement. However, for most of us, we need to be aware of the dangers and the fact that eventually we will adjust to retirement and learn to enjoy the freedom it brings.

### **Some background theory**

In my work with students who displayed severe behaviours we recognised the emotional sequence those kids who successfully transitioned back to school experienced. This process can be explained through a

modification of the Kübler-Ross stages of grief and dying. In a sense the student went through the 'death' of behaviours they had relied on and replaced them with functional behaviours. The same concept can be applied to retirement.

This is illustrated below:



From this diagram you can see that at first there is what I call the 'honeymoon' where we enjoy our new-found freedoms. In this early stage we are unconscious that we are ill-prepared for the change in front of us.

Soon we become aware that something is missing but we don't really understand what. We are now conscious that we are incompetent retirees.

This moves us into a phase where we become extremely vulnerable, and we resent that we have lost so much. This is the stage the students struggled with and the more damaged they were, the longer this resentment continued. This is the time you must look after yourself and, not that you need reminding, keep an eye out for your friends and colleagues.

But after some time and effort you will reset your expectations – not lower them – and find replacement activities that will give you a healthy purpose. At first you might have to force yourself to participate, but by now you are conscious that you need to have something to do, something to be competent at. Eventually your transition will be complete and you can enjoy your remaining years.

### Here are some things that will help

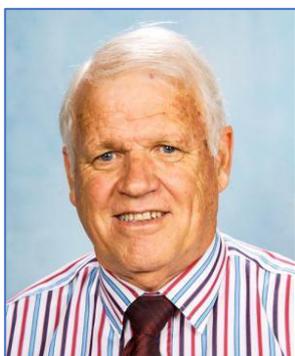
- Stay Healthy – make sure you eat well and take some regular exercise. Be conscious that taking up a wine appreciation course could be dangerous!
- Be Social – Don't go it alone, social support is essential for good mental health. When you leave work you leave a built-in social network. Use your time to enrich existing friendships and family connections and engage in activities that will introduce you to new friends.
- Develop a Routine – The sudden loss of structure can be unsettling. You will be far better off if you have a plan for the day, things that you want to accomplish. If you let the days fritter away you will reinforce your resentment of retirement. It doesn't have to be much of a plan – but it will get you up!

- Give Back – I see so many of my colleagues giving back to the profession, but I see many more not having that opportunity. If you are not invited back then look for other activities where you can interconnect. We all had a ‘topic’ we preferred to teach in our early career, maybe it was History or Industrial Arts. If you look about there are plenty of groups that would welcome your expertise. Don’t be shy!
- Be a Lifelong Learner – How many times in your career did you tell your school community that we should always be lifelong learners? So now is the time to practice what you preached! There are plenty of ways this can happen, from attending public lectures available in most cities, listening to podcasts or even re-enrolling at university. There are so many ways you can access materials that support your learning. A bonus is that by keeping your brain active you reduce the probability of developing Dementia or Alzheimer’s.

I have to acknowledge our fantastic NSWSPC Principal Futures group and in particular Brian Ralph, Cassy Norris and Terry Tunkunas. This initiative came out of the Secondary Principals’ Council and provides the very support I have outlined above. Not only does it provide support, it gives us the opportunity to ‘look after’ those new members who may not have adjusted to their life in retirement!

#### **Contributor details**

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John was the Principal of Holsworthy High from 2000-2016 and before that, Campbell House School. He is interested in behaviour management of children with extreme behaviours and loves to travel!